Arrgh: The "sea sacker" method for addressing reviewer comments

By Michael T. Braun, PhD

In this essay, Dr. Braun details his approach to addressing reviewer comments when revising a manuscript, represented by the memorable CSACR (pronounced "sea sacker") acronym. He also suggests authors not sail alone...

One of the first things I remember my advisor Lyn Van Swol telling me about reviewer comments is that she always gives herself a week after reading them to wallow in misery, to feel all the feelings, to woe that she will never make it, she picked the wrong field, and she doesn't know what she's doing. After that, she reads the comments again, and they don't seem nearly as bad as she initially thought.

This is the opening anecdote I shared during a recent presentation to Kinetic3, Kern Institute's faculty development program. We're not weak just because reviewer comments hurt and make us feel we can't go on! It's a normal reaction, whether it is your first paper or your 300th.

As I've developed my own strategies to address reviewer comments, granting myself time to feel overwhelmed has been helpful. So has an organizational strategy that makes comments easier to deal with and makes describing the changes you made to your manuscript simpler. I call it the CSACR (pronounced "sea sacker") Method.

"Sea sacker?" you ask. "Like a pirate?" If holding that image in your mind helps you remember, then absolutely like a pirate! We can be pirates of academic publishing, though I'd prefer to hold to pirate values like equal shares for all and flat leadership structures rather than some of the less savory aspects of piracy.

CSACR stands for Comment, Section, Action, Change, and Response. And these are the column headings you should make in a spreadsheet to organize your response to reviewers. Then, use one row per suggested revision and include the following information:

Comment: Rephrase the suggested revision in your own words. This is the best way to get the substance out of the sting of the comment.

For example, imagine a reviewer wrote this:

"This manuscript can do nothing more than demonstrate a relationship between two variables, yet the discussion section uses language that may be coded as suggesting there is a causal relationship. This overreach is outrageous, and I encourage the editor to censure the authors to ensure they correct these egregious errors."

To rephrase, I'd write, "Double check the discussion section for language that suggests causality."

Or how about this one?

"While the paper may be sound, the innumerable typographical errors and gramatical goofs made it almost impossible for me to continue reviewing the paper. Only with exceptional strength of will was I able to complete the task."

The rephrase couldn't be simpler: "Proofread before resubmitting." And that's something you were going to do anyway! (In the process of rephrasing, save a little time for eye-rolling. Though I made up the two comments above, they aren't far off from comments I've received and... ahem... perhaps have written myself as a reviewer.)

Section: This is the simplest part. To which section of the paper does this comment apply? You may end up creating a couple lines for a single comment if the comment needs to be addressed in a couple sections. For example, perhaps the reviewer suggests an addition to the introduction that you'll also need to return to in the discussion—I'd use two lines for that comment, one with section "intro" and another with section "discussion." Feel free to include a section label of "entire paper" for comments like proofreading.

Action: Now for the hardest part! This is where you state what you're going to do to address the comment. Options range from nothing to wholescale revision. Making those choices about what to revise could fill a whole book, so I won't give it short shrift here.

Instead, I'll say, if you need help, that's what Kern Institute Collaboration for Scholarship (KICS) is here for!

The action column ends up looking like a to-do list, and I try to be as specific as possible, especially if sharing this document with any co-authors. You'll get to mark off each of these to-do items as you revise by documenting changes in the next column, which is helpfully called...

Change: With as many specific details as possible, state exactly what you changed. I'm fond of including the actual text changes, even though it makes the spreadsheet rows grow taller and taller. For example, if you added a paragraph based on a reviewer comment, then include the paragraph in your description of the change. Why make the reviewer comb back through the paper to find the change? Tell them exactly what you did so that they don't go through the

paper, change their mind about the issue, and say in their next round of comments, "Why did you include this extraneous paragraph?"

I even recommend including what you deleted! You should also note when you changed nothing, a perfectly reasonable response to a comment. Ultimately, my guidance is to be overly thorough in your documentation, because it's going to help you craft your...

Response: The response is how you explain your action and associated change (or lack of change), and this is a task of persuasion! Here, you can combine pieces from the previous four columns.

"Reviewer 3 suggested [comment rephrased in your own words] in the [section]. To address this, we [action]. [Describe the change.]"

And then, if needed, give the "why." I like to give a why no matter what my action was. If I agree with the reviewer, I like to tell them why I agreed with them. It's not satisfying for a reviewer to read that you made a change resentfully or because you thought—if changing—the reviewer would automatically judge the paper worthy of publication.

If I disagreed and did nothing, the reason why is even more important. The reviewer obviously thinks a change is needed—that's why they wrote their comment. Convincing the reviewer that the paper is stronger without the change and that there is ample reason for not making the change is another subject that deserves greater attention. Suffice it to say, you document your reasoning in the response column.

And that's it! You're now a full-fledged sea sacker! Let your piratical ways take you far in the lawless land of academic publishing! And just as pirates didn't sail alone, you shouldn't be without a crew.

To find new mates, please do reach out to KICS! We'd love to help you navigate a complicated revision. Email me (or try semaphore) for help: micbraun@mcw.edu.

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